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The future of leisure: making leisure work

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The general subject of this paper is the future of leisure. It is suggested that the existing forecasts over the last forty years regarding the future of leisure – either leisure's abundance or its scarcity – depend upon taking leisure and work either segmentally or even as polar opposites. It is argued that recovering a basic idea found in Samuel Smiles' book *Self-Help* (1859) could go a long way toward establishing an identity between real work and real leisure. Smiles is typically read as a mere lyric poet and as a writer in part responsible for projecting upon his people horrid centres of industrialism by way of promoting what is historically referred to as the Victorian work ethic. But Smiles can be read differently. In this paper it is argued that Smiles' interpretation of *self-help* is so inclusive as to be useful in understanding the nature and significance of the future of leisure if, that is, we take leisure to be work.

Introduction

It was Mark Twain who once observed that the art of prophesy is very difficult, especially with regard to the future. Notwithstanding the truth of Twain's tongue-in-cheek remark, there is still good reason to ponder the future. For instance, consider the impact of modern technology in general on the future. Unless one is utterly convinced that whatever we are technologically capable of doing, we should do, there is still plenty of room for the play of intelligent human choices in deciding what constitutes the wise use of our potential technological capabilities.

Over the last 40 years in particular, the human experience of leisure has been an occasional subject of future forecasting. These writings have generally argued for a future based essentially on either the abundance or on the scarcity of mass leisure. On the one hand, a number of writers have suggested that the future of leisure is, indeed, bright (see, for example, Denney, 1957; Neumeyer and Neumeyer, 1958; Kaplan, 1960; Brightbill, 1961; Lee, 1964; Asimov, 1981; Neulinger, 1990). The general gist of these optimistic arguments is that our increasing technological sophistication has created time-saving machinery; that the time saved by the use of this machinery – such as leaf blowers and microwaves – has the potential for being plowed into leisure pursuits; and finally, that technological sophistication itself has multiplied leisure opportunities practically beyond belief merely through the new products it creates – the mountain bikes, the roller blades, and the virtual reality games.

On the other hand, there are writers who are much less enthusiastic about the prospects for the future of leisure (see, for instance, Kerr 1962; Linder,

1970; Schumacher, 1979; Goodale and Godbey, 1988; Fassel, 1990; Schor, 1991). What these authors seem to suggest is, given the direction of our social and economic worlds in these last few decades in particular, that we are a harried and overworked populace; that we are chronically experiencing time conflicts, time scarcity, and time deepening; and, if Schor (1991) is correct, that, and quite unexpectedly, our present and future tendencies indicate not an abundance of leisure, but its actual and steady decline.

One of the common assumptions in most of these thoughtful discussions – whether optimists or pessimists – is the tendency to see leisure and work at the very least as different segments of our lived reality, or at the very most as polar opposites. In this paper, a different approach is taken. What if in these various analyses we are misunderstanding the relationship between work and leisure? What if there is a strong identity between real work and real leisure? What if we can make leisure work?

A surprising prophet: Samuel Smiles

In 1859, the same year as Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* and John Stuart Mill's *Essay on Liberty*, the forty-six year old Scotsman, Samuel Smiles, published a book entitled *Self-Help*. Recall that Smiles was born in southern Scotland, and took his medical degree from Edinburgh University. He practiced medicine for a short while in his home town of Haddington but in 1838 he moved to the heavily industrialized city of Leeds, in northern England. In Leeds, Smiles turned his attention to journalism. He became interested in English politics, began to write pieces for the newspapers, gave talks to the local literary societies, and soon became an editor of *The Leeds Times*. Eventually his energies led him to become the secretary to a couple of railways and eventually a big wheel in the nationalizing of the English railway system.

But Smiles gave mid-Victorian England and the world a good deal more than the national rails when he published *Self-Help*. In it he celebrated certain age-old virtues that when exhibited together, he argued, constitute genuine human growth. His thesis was that, to a great extent, help that is provided from without can and usually does enfeeble a human being; but help from within, self-help that is, can and usually does provide a strength of character that not only invigorates, but perseveres. Throughout his lengthy discussion Smiles provided example after example of not always well-known individuals, but of successful people who illustrated the good sense and the general goodness of so living by the precept of self-help. And Smiles' meaning of 'success' was not necessarily the same as worldly success, since, he wrote, if worldly success means the dazzling accumulation of money, 'he who recognizes no higher logic than that of the shilling, may become a very rich man, and yet all the while an exceedingly poor creature' (p. 298). In other words, Smiles' idea was not to preach a gospel of selfishness, that is, of helping oneself *to* whatever can be easily and perhaps thoughtlessly reached; only that individually speaking, honourable and sustained industry will bring distinctive personal progress.

Such personal progress, Smiles thought, naturally extended to distinctive and honourable progress on the national and global levels as well. However, much human character is influenced by the subtleties of friends, neighbours, and families, by schools, by various institutions, and by inherited legacies from generations coming before us, Smiles argued that still, and however great these influences are, it is nevertheless just as clear that human beings, to be human beings, must be the active personal agents of their own well-being and well-doing. By so acting and doing, self-governing brings about better and better governments: 'National progress is the sum of individual industry, energy, and uprightness, as national decay is of individual idleness, selfishness and vice' (p. 36).

Smiles' book caught on and sold well, much to the surprise of everyone, including Smiles and his publisher John Murray. Twenty thousand copies the first year, fifty-five thousand in five years, nearly a quarter of a million by the turn of the century, and by its hundredth anniversary the book was in its seventy-second impression. Besides its popularity in the English-speaking world, Smiles' message was translated into numerous European, Indian, and Asian languages. His book quickly outdistanced and outlived other so-called 'self-improvement' books of the day for several reasons. One was his choice of anecdote over technique. That is, he profusely illustrated his work with examples of persevering persons from all culture-bearing fields, such as artisans and mechanics, inventors and discoverers, politicians and civil-servants, philosophers and poets, business people and healers, farmers and teachers. In other words, he used biography instead of the slick, ready-made recipes for success common to the popular psychologizers of the day. His text was interesting and real.

Another reason for its immediate and continued success was Smiles' seeming preference for the good, much good, over the best. That is, what inspired the readers of *Self-Help* was the old-fashioned idea that ordinary people from all walks of life, with the right disposition and goals, could achieve good works. Not only did his hundreds of examples come from all the classes – from the huts of the poor and the mansions of the rich – but his main argument was that, even in the highest levels of human achievement, it was the common qualities that proved to be the most useful. Sure, genius and talent exist, he said, but in the main it was not the occasional genius that made as much difference to the quotidian world as ordinary people who applied themselves to an interesting problem or project or cause and won the day by common sense, attentiveness, care, diligence, patience, and, from time to time, a bit of good fortune. And good fortune, he believed, was usually on the side of the industrious.

One final reason for the universal appeal of Smiles' thesis was his belief that trying and failing and trying again was part and parcel of self-help. With a stout heart and the courage to try, moderately blessed people can overcome false starts and mis-steps and seemingly impossible difficulties by their own habits of *will*. Such will-power and pluck and self-reliance shapes a life profoundly. In fact, practical industry, Smiles wrote, with all the pitfalls and obstacles therein – he meant the mettle-testing – was the main root and spring

of all that is called progress in individuals. There could be no heavier curse upon mankind, he argued, that the complete gratification of all a people's wishes, leaving no room at all for hopes, dreams, or struggles. Indeed, the gospel of self-help not only creates, but sustains human purpose and progress.

An unconventional reading of Smiles

Now, the conventional way to read Smiles is to see his treatise as a presentation and illustration of what has been loosely called the Victorian work ethic. Smiles' book is usually considered the kind of tract worshipped by the so-called captains of industry, praising as it does the usefulness of good work habits and other selected Victorian business-serving virtues. Ordinarily, it would be the kind of textual content that students of leisure might cite as an example of the antithesis of the nature of leisure, this because the contemporary and popular meaning of a leisure ethic is often set in opposition to the meaning of a work ethic. We are all quite familiar with the history of this idea since Smiles' time and the gradual changes – especially in American life – whereby once integrated life experiences became segmented; that is, where the idea of work and non-work time became intellectually and experientially distinguished where they had not been so distinguished before, and where somehow it became almost a collective truism that roughly one-third of our precious time could or should be reserved for either recuperation, re-creation, diversion, amusement, idleness, or escape. From this came the birth of the popular idea of leisure time and the consistent, easy willingness to see work and leisure as either loosely segmented or as completely polar opposites.

But there is another way to read Smiles. And at least in one regard, if Smiles' message is looked at more analytically than historically, we find a surprising and curious opportunity embedded in his argument. The textual content of Smiles' work could be interpreted as leisure's thesis not antithesis, and in turn such a reading could become a useful guide to understanding, cultivating, and perpetuating the near-future of the experience leisure.

One of the ironies of Smiles' vision – that is, his sustained cheerleading for human industry and perseverance – is that to a great extent homing in as we have for nearly a century and a half on industriousness and the sense of purpose such industriousness somehow or another creates, has resulted in a modern life where there are fewer and fewer opportunities to exhibit the very industriousness which more or less brought us here. For example, recall Studs Terkel's classic and sad book called *Working* (1972), published not long after the Smiles centenary. If his interviews were even close to indicating the modern temper of our working lives, most workers are not much satisfied with what they do eight hours or more a day. Terkel chatted with all kinds of workers: labourers and career people, public and commercial help, leaders and followers, builders and brokers, makers and sellers and servers – the privates, sergeants, captains, and now the generals of corporate industry. In reading these interviews today it is clear just how far we have diverged from

the spirit of the Samuel Smiles text; it would now seem that work does much less in particular *for* us than it does in general *to* us. Remember Terkel's introductory paragraph?

This book, being about work, is by its very nature, about violence – to the spirit as well as to the body. It is about ulcers as well as about accidents, about shouting matches as well as fistfights, about nervous breakdowns as well as kicking the dog around. It is, above all (or beneath all), about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us. (Terkel, 1972, p. xiii)

Nora Watson, a publishing company staff writer and sometimes editor, bluntly told Terkel that jobs were simply not big enough for people any more; jobs are too small for our spirits, she said. The only way to survive, she continued, whether factory worker or high rise executive, is to absent your spirit from it all. 'My mind has been so divorced from my job, except as a source of income, it's really absurd' (Terkel, 1972, p. 675).

Speaking of the absurd, work became mere job well before Nora Watson experienced it, well before she told Terkel that it was so demeaning to be unchallenged in her own job. Over twenty years before Terkel's interviews, Paul Goodman, in his book *Growing Up Absurd* (1951), saw this same problem, this devaluation of work and the alienation it could so often produce. Goodman thought he knew why the problem was arising in particular and especially then. Working with honour and dignity in the mid-twentieth century, he explained, was just about impossible largely because of the unquestionable uselessness and redundancy of most of what is produced. In American society in particular, Goodman wrote, we have 'tried so hard and ably to defend the practice and theory of production for profit and not primarily for use that now it has succeeded in making its job and products profitable and useless' (p. 19).

Since both the 1950s and the 1970s, of course, the vast majority of people are employed not in production at all, but in the service sector and in various administrative routines. But this makes the idea of self-help even more difficult to realize since little of a tangible nature is ever really produced. So today it is even more likely that the honour and dignity of doing something well is replaced by job experiences that all too frequently are marked by a lack of challenge, drudgery, ambiguity, repetition, resignation, interminable bureaucratic supervision and evaluation, long hours, fear and the inertia fear creates, and the doing of what seem to be largely unnecessary or useless tasks – overall a limitation, if not a complete paralysis, of the human spirit. There is little surprise in the observation of a 1990s management consultant, Diane Fassell, who noted that 'Everywhere I go it seems people are killing themselves with work, busyness, rushing, caring, and rescuing' (Fassell, 1990, p. 2).

But realizing self-help is not easy regardless of the time period. Even in Smiles' time it was not easy. After all, his age was not particularly golden either or his book would not have been necessary; much skullduggery and indifference existed then too: laziness, job truancy, gambling and alcohol excesses, fraud, political incompetence, false advertising, waste, inefficiency,

animal cruelty, and the tendency to satisfy the lowest, not the highest common denominator – certainly not much social virtue here.

Most kinds of these only marginally civilized behaviours, Smiles thought, were the result of bad habits learned early on; too much limitation and guidance and not enough freedom for youngsters. Such an up-bringing hinders the habits of self-help. He wrote that ambition and forced help from without is like the ‘bladders tied under the arms of one who has not taught himself to swim’ (Smiles, 1859, p. 309). Without the confidence of learning to do something by oneself – and following Smiles’ change in metaphors here – the urge will be to pull in one’s horse while he is jumping. Then, little really gets done because so little is ever attempted.

What Smiles was getting exercised over was the tendency even then in popular education of truncating self-help experiences by way of inventing labour-saving techniques, of taking short-cuts to science or mathematics, or of learning a language in ‘twelve easy lessons’. This was a bad habit, he thought, and when learned early infects the adult like a disease. The tendency reminded him of the lady of some fashion who engaged a master tutor to teach her a language on the condition that he did not plague her with verbs and participles. Smiles called this ‘smatter-knowledge’. It may be better than nothing, he wrote, but all too often it is good for nothing; and education, which in the end is always a result of self-help, becomes mere amusement (see Smiles, 1959, p. 307–12).

Clearly, and since then, we have been moving further away from self-help, not towards it, for the cause of self-help has been substantially weakened by this century’s continued and growing popular fascination with speed, novelty, and over-simplification. For example, nearly three-quarters of a century after Smiles, Aldous Huxley (1926) was saying essentially the same thing as Smiles did about ordinary adult life tendencies. Huxley acknowledged that it was indeed true that most progress comes from simplifying the complex. Besides such intellectual simplifications as have occurred in language (from picture writing to alphabetic writing) and the use of mathematical symbols (from Roman numerals to algebraic symbols), even the great intellectual and practical discoveries ‘have been in the nature of technical simplifications for the saving of time and energy’ (Huxley, 1926, p. 66).

But where the question of means and ends is concerned, Huxley warned, if simplifying *means* becomes an end in itself, then the *ends* to which the means are allegedly dedicated become neglected. When viewing pictures substitutes for reading and writing, or when calculating machines are used for simple mental figuring, then the human ability to think in the void, or to reason things through, or to follow an argument, suffers. Even the ability to keep proper ends in mind or the ability to imagine alternative or crisper, more satisfying ends can be compromised, Huxley thought, when well nigh practically everything is made too simple and too easy.

But what particularly galled Huxley in this sweeping urge to simplify everything was that this tendency, even then, seemed particularly devastating with regard to the experience of leisure and play. He could rationalize the technology tendency when it came to simplifying the drudgery of the world.

But not leisure. He cited such advanced techniques as the camera, process reproduction, the gramophone, the cinema, the wireless, and the telephone as examples of inventions that had modified certain leisure pursuits in the direction of ever-increasing simplicity. 'In the past, if a man wanted to make a portrait or decorate his house', Huxley wrote, 'he had to draw or paint; today (*sic*), he makes use of his Kodak or buys a coloured photograph' (Huxley, 1926, p. 66). Huxley went on giving other examples. For instance, in earlier days if a person lived a good distance from a large urban centre, and if he or she wanted to see a dramatic performance, the locals had to organize the show themselves, the basic idea of community theatre. Today, he said, in the 1920s all one has to do is go to the village picture theatre. Or, if one wanted to listen to music in the olden days, he had to learn to sing, or to play an instrument; today, he said, all one has to do is turn on the gramophone or maybe the wireless. Things have become so easy, he observed, that indulging personally and locally in even these time immemorial pastimes – art, drama, music – has become entirely unnecessary.

Naturally there are good arguments on the other side of Huxley here, for instance that the ready-made can and does often provoke some people into making even better music or art or drama. But in the three-quarters of a century since Huxley's day, and even though the sum total of leisure possibilities has been multiplied a million fold by our modern technology, Huxley's basic point should not be forgotten. However busy people seem to be about their amusements – then or now, wirelasses or Game Boys – Huxley believed that the danger of simplifying almost everything brought with it two related problems, both familiar today: an atrophying of common, ordinary creative ability; and, the corresponding boredom that goes along with it. The ready-made, standardized tools and entertainments, he thought, were in the end extinguishing human selves, not perpetuating them:

The cinema, the gramophone, the wireless are distractions; but they do nothing to satisfy man's desire for self-assertion and self-expression; they give him none of the happiness which comes from the consciousness of something personally accomplished. (Huxley, 1926, p. 66)

So instead of self-expansion, a shrinkage-of-self can occur. It is the kind of shrinkage that historian Jacques Barzun had in mind when he once took the position that libraries and museums can inhibit human progress more than they inspire it. He thought it was at least arguable that the cumulative collections of works of the dead reduce the degrees of freedom of the living, hence discouraging personal accomplishment more than liberating it; the phrase 'that's been done before' is a verbal bucket of cold water when thrown in the direction of any working personal object.

In any case, the obstacle – or at least a major obstacle – to the future of edifying leisure experiences turns out to be the very god we have been worshipping for nearly a century: in a word, *convenience*. Instead of being leisure's benefactor, convenience can be leisure's enemy; instead of technology breathing life into leisure opportunities, it may have strangled the spirit out of them. Making things simple and easy, saving us time, using the ready-made,

satisfying our every desire, using what human robots or real robots make, speedily feeding our impatiences – all watch-phrases for our era – could not be any further from Smiles' idea of self-help. With so much done *for* us, there is little left to do *by* us except bustle and hustle a bit in shopping around for the produced goods and services, haggle with the sellers of them, and consume whatever our often spirit-killing jobs enable us to afford. We become dazzled with the tools and forget the variety of dreams we can build with them. Surely nothing could be worse for our future than perpetuating this gradual century-long exchange of the genuine and essentially inconvenient leisure/work experience for consumptive and essentially convenient amusements, pastimes, and diversions.

Making leisure work

On the other hand, and once we confront the possibility that a convenience-society is not necessarily a society of leisure, there is an interesting opportunity for investing in leisure futures. If Smiles was right that self-help is such a huge and inspiring producer of good persons and good works, then self-help as an organizing idea could and should become a distinctive characteristic of the experience of leisure. In other words, is it possible that the future of leisure lies in making leisure work?

Let us return for a moment to Smiles' basic thesis that real work is virtuous and that by way of real work human beings exhibit humanizing characteristics – perseverance, self-reliance, cheerfulness, concentration of purpose. If we study all the life-examples Smiles provides where industry and accomplishment prevail and give meaning and shape to a life and to those lives self-helpers touch by their example, we find more than a routine Victorian tract about how important it is to labour or toil incessantly and mindlessly; instead, what can be seen is a lengthy, anecdotal description of humans-at-leisure. His human examples were immersed in seamless life experiences that define the ground meaning of leisure as such: self-organizing, autotelic, self-referential, the experience of freedom of a more non-autonomous kind, a following after something, difficult, yes sometimes; failure, yes, that too, but more often than not lived experiences defined by an overcoming, and that are in the main edifying and progressive. Whether inventors or producers, artists or musicians, writers or poets, gardeners or millwrights, bakers or candlestick makers, Smiles described full-hearted and passion-filled people not consuming, but being consumed by their honourable and noble engagements.

This disciplined spirit and engagement was exactly what Huxley was lamenting the loss of, 75 years after Smiles' book appeared. Self-help and self-teaching, Huxley feared, would in time become horribly underrated and underexperienced. Next, like a link in a scholarly chain, fifty years after Huxley's warnings and at about the same time Goodman (1956) wrote up his frustrations, Barzun (1959) picked up the self-help cause when he spoke of true education as not mere schooling; he praised self-help for what wonderful changes, even miracles, it can spawn. It is passion in and for work that gives education its dramatic potential, he thought. What is learned or produced or

created becomes a possession of the worker and becomes habit-forming, even a happy obsession, for most all of it is self-taught. Abandoning real work, Barzun thought, was the greatest of modern deprivations, 'for all other occupations kill time and drain the spirit, whereas work fills both ...' (Barzun, 1959, p. 125).

All four of these writers – Smiles, Huxley, Goodman, and Barzun – believed that it is difficulty conquered that creates human progress or, better, human progression. Given the tone and logic of their discussions, there is no really good reason not to consider the possibility that what they all describe as work is even better understood as the experience of leisure. That is, leisure as experienced and at its culture-bearing best *can* be looked at this way: a doing, a struggle sometimes, a deliberate project dutifully and responsibly undertaken, whether short-term or long, but launched into with goals in mind, and with concentrated discipline and cheerful self-discipline, a learning that is necessarily and by definition inconvenient, usually satisfying and sometimes even inspiring, but always unhurried, functional, and generative. That is, work. Good leisure is good and deliberative work. Good leisure habits are good work habits. And making leisure work in today's and tomorrow's world is self-help instantiated.

Conclusion

The technological developments of the twentieth century have driven such a substantial wedge between so-called work and so-called leisure, that it has crippled both. On the one hand, our modern work tasks are so specialized and often undemanding, so senseless, even humiliating, that human virtues of the self-help kind atrophy. And, on the other hand, our modern leisure is so escape-oriented, refuge-like, passive, so over-simplified and so convenient that we often learn or do or accomplish nothing in particular by way of it, so here too the experience of self-help withers. When the idea of achievement and the idea of enjoyment are intellectually and experientially separated, as they have become so today, the generative value of self-help is forever extinguished.

If this re-interpretation of Samuel Smiles' meaning of self-help is to be useful to leisure scholars, there must be a renewed examination of the possibility of a coincidence between work and leisure based on the convergence of the practical utility of both. That is, in a world where leisure is work and work is leisure, technology will be put in its proper place: as a mere means, not as an end in-itself. Our technological developments must be measured against the extent to which our work/leisure opportunities are multiplied. Above all, we must actively resist the modern trend to worship technology when: it serves to erase instead of enhance the character-forming habits of self-help; or when it results in separating and therefore trivializing both work and leisure; or when it standardizes, oversimplifies, homogenizes, and produces a one-size-fits-all culture; or when it tramples over useful traditions, rituals, myths, historical continuities, and the sense of being settled or rooted, that is, the sense of being at home.

Whatever future direction such scholarly thinking takes and whatever sensible improvements result from such thinking, it seems that the basic idea of an identity between work and leisure created through the experience of self-help could be at the root of it all. This may be an old-fashioned response to the demands of the twenty-first century, but it is a well-fashioned response. For the human character that self-help can create is the power that generates and sustains a well-working – that is, a leisure based – culture.

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